

For parents, nothing is probably more painful than seeing their children go before they do.

## [Warring era arc] [7] [To my daughter] [9684]

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Year 9684 Day 177

A small fleet of five cruisers along with a SSS slate are approaching a spot in middle of nowhere. The ships bear the emblem of Saturn. They are swiftly approaching a debris field.

“Sir, we are approaching our destination,” A crew on bridge speaks aloud.

Cesper is sitting in the captain’s chair.

“On screen,” He responds.

A holographic screen pops up, displaying countless pieces of what were once ships in space. The area is literally full of such debris. Some are small. Some are big enough to be able to identify as a piece of a ship. It is full of them to a point that it would be near impossible to navigate into the field without shields.

Cesper's fleet is at a spot where the final battle occurred on year 9662. It is where the invasion ended ultimately. It is also where his daughter, Suu, perished after leading a suicide attack.

"I am sorry, lass, that it took me this long to come here ...," He laments in a whispering tone.

It has been two decades since the battle. He wanted to come here but had no means to. He was fleeing for life after all.

Ever since he settled down on Saturn, it has been a long road. At first, he was merely an advisor to Gaer, the Saturn president. He wanted to get into politics, and Gaer was well aware of it. Since his talents were recognized by the president, it was a lot easier. Even so, he needed something to kickstart his new political career.

Thus came the spacefarer project. It was a resounding success initially which propelling him enough to a point that he could have a shot at winning a local election.

Even then he lost his local election two times before finally being elected recently. He is now an official member of Saturn Ironhall. The first act he has done as a member of Saturn parliament is that he asked to send a small fleet for a scavenging mission. The location was the spot they are currently at.

Most, if not all, parliament members were aware of a fact that Cesper was asking for it because he wanted to be where his daughter perished. The scavenging part was just an excuse although a valid excuse since Saturn could use any free materials they could get.

Gaer, the president of Saturn, silently sent messages to parliament members to approve. And indeed Cesper did acquire 99% of YES for his proposal which was actually the first time ever to receive 99% of anything for the history of Ironhall.

And here he is. He stands up from his chair as he gives out an order.

“Dispatch shuttles and begin the savaging mission,” He declares. “I will be in my quarter.”

“Aye, sir.”

Then he walks into his quarter, sealing the door shut. Taking a deep breath as he walks toward a sofa, he drops him down into it, staring at ceiling for a moment as he speaks.

“Computer, display the field, six screens.”

Six holographic screen pops up in front of him in two rows, each displaying different parts of the debris field. Crossing his fingers, he stares at the screens for a moment. His swift eye movements suggest that he is looking for something.

“Computer, locate USF Imparis.”

It takes a while for a response.

“Negative.”

He expected that and summons a chief engineer.

“Called me, sir?” A bald man with deep sideburns enters his quarter soon enough. At this point, Cesper stands up from his sofa and sits down in front of his desk.

“I’d like to ask a question.”

“Go on, sir.”

He explains that he would like to locate a specific ship. “USF Imparis,” He adds.

“Any way to accomplish this?” He asks.

The engineer’s lips move up a bit as he thinks. After a moment, he replies, “A ship’s ROM must be powered to be able to answer calls by sensors. It doesn’t require a lot of power...” He scratches his chin. “I believe it needs just 5V and 0.5 Amp minimum.”

“So, if a ship is completely out of power, we cannot identify its signature, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cesper folds his arms as he lets out a long sigh. There is no way he could go through every single debris and power it one by one.

“There is ... a way, perhaps,” The engineer says reluctantly.

“Oh?” Cesper is intrigued. “Please go on.”

The engineer reminds him again that the identifier ROM chips do not need a lot of power and that they are isolated generally, meaning even if a ship is completely destroyed, the identifier ROM chip and its circuitry should still be functional.

“An EMP blast of sort, a very subtle one,” The engineer explains. “Just to give enough of a jolt for the circuitry to wake up briefly. It will short out almost instantly but it will respond for, like a micro second.”

Cesper narrows his eyes and responds after a few seconds. “Are you implying we send out an active scan right after the EMP blast?”

The engineer grins and adds, “An active scan here might attract pirates, but they shouldn’t be a concern for us.”

Indeed.

“Could it damage our own ships though?”

The engineer shakes his head. “No, sir. The EMP blast I am talking about is too weak to do any real damage to fully intact ships. They are well-shielded for a certain threshold.”

If so, if then, there isn’t much to hesitate, Cesper thinks. “Go ahead. Do it.”

“Aye, sir.”

Cesper and the engineer walk out of his quarter which is located right next to the ship’s bridge. The engineer gets down to a console, excusing a crew member. His

fingers soon get busy as he configures an EMP blast and an active scan together. Meanwhile, Ceper sits down in his captain's chair and silently waits.

For Ceper, his daughter wasn't his everything. He was a single father and raised her on his own. He cared for her greatly, but he wasn't naive enough to claim that his daughter meant everything.

In an era where humans live well up to four hundred years, one's child is just that, a child. They grow up in about two decades, and parents let them go. That's how it works in this era.

He has always thought his own daughter was a bit of an oddball. He didn't raise her to be such a righteous and strict person. He simply let her be most of time. What intrigued him was her decision for the suicide attack which made him believe that perhaps his daughter was in love with Admiral Kain. At the same time, he also saw no evidence of such. He even asked, one time, his daughter about her potential feelings for the Admiral.

His daughter seemed always undecided on everything. But such a person does not do suicide attacks, he felt. She was determined; she had to be.

He wanted the blackbox of USF Imparis to re-live what his daughter went through in her last moments.

So, here he is, trying to locate debris of USF Imparis and potentially retrieve its blackbox or at least records.

“Sir,” The engineer alerts. “It’s ready. On your order, sir.”

Snapping out of his brief thoughts, Cesper clears his throat, then orders. “Fire away.”

From outside, it appears as if nothing happened. After all, the EMP blast was a very weak wave.

“I am getting a lot, I mean A LOT, of results, sir,” The engineer informs. “It feels like a field full of mines that just went off all at once.”

“Do we have what I need?” Cesper inquires.

“Give me a sec, sir. I need to apply some filters to sort out.”

It does take a moment but -

“Indeed you do, sir. A debris has just identified itself to be a part of USF Imprais. We have it, sir.”

Cesper’s eyes brighten up at last. “Focus on that debris. Find its blackbox or at least recover records.”

The engineer halts for a really brief moment, realizing his true intention for this operation. But he sees no ill or harmful intention. Thus, he continues on.

“Yes, sir. You shall have it,” He says indifferently.

Cesper is in the captain's chair but he is not the captain of the ship or even the fleet. He is simply an Ironhall member who is carrying an order for a scavenging mission. If required, he could easily be overruled.

Even the chief engineer is capable of overriding him although highly unlikely as long as he isn't doing anything too stupid.

"Good, good ...," Cesper says as he sinks deep into the chair. He stares at ceiling vacantly.

Two decades, he has waited. He feels like he is getting impatient.

Approximately five hours later, a preliminary report came in. The chief engineer is reading the report in Cesper's quarter with him sitting in front of his desk.

"The debris appears to be a small part of USF Imparis. It is very likely that it belonged to upper middle part of the ship. It's heavily charred and melted."

"Can any records be retrieved?"

"We are currently looking into it, sir. However, so far, we've seen no evidence of any sort of functional circuitry. If there was any, the EMP blast may have finished it off."

"See if you can find any bodies."

"That shall be done, sir."

As the chief engineer turns around to leave, he remarks.

“The debris can fit into the slate, sir.”

Unexpected, Cesper talks back promptly, “Oh?”

“It’s small enough, sir. It’s probably better if we bring it into a controlled environment. However, doing so will prevent us from scavenging.”

The chief engineer is indirectly testing him. The navy do not like to be used for personal purposes and, right now, they are being used for a personal purpose. While he has no intention to override Cesper, he wants to see his character.

With his eyes half-shut, Cesper does consider the engineer’s suggestion but rejects it.

“No, our mission is to scavenge. We will stick to what we’ve come for. My quest for Imparis ... is simply personal.” Cesper admits plainly to what the engineer is suspecting.

And the engineer dares him on. “Even if it has taken 20 years, and this may be your last chance?”

“Doesn’t alter the fact that she is dead and a goner. What difference will it make whether I fulfill my wish or not?”

“You will get a closure as her father.”

Cesper lets out a brief laugh while shaking his head in shame. There is a bitter smile on his face. “A failure father like me doesn’t really deserve that. This is my sin.”

The engineer turns around finally and simply departs without any further response.

As per Cesper's order, the scavenging mission goes on as planned. Materials of high value are being exacted on the spot and are hauled into the cargo bay of a slate. There are over fifty shuttles doing the job left and right. It is quite a busy scene.

Although skeptical at first, the navy starts to see the value in Cesper's proposal for the scavenging mission after a report is sent to the Ironhall that the value of the cargo will exceed 250 million credit. A few runs like these would get them free cruisers essentially.

All this time, Cesper has been stuck in his quarter, saying not a thing. He does order several bags of whiskey. Bags because of zero gravity. One would drink with a straw.

When the last day of the scavenging mission, the chief engineer enters the bridge with a small chip in his hand. He walks toward the Cesper and -

"No bodies but I have some data, sir," He informs Cesper who is casually having his head supported by his left hand sideways in the captain's chair, looking mildly bored.

"Pardon?"

"We've actually managed to secure some bits of data from the debris."

It takes him only a second to realize that he was talking about USF Imparis debris.

The engineer adds, "It is actually a video file but has been heavily degraded due to intense radiation. We were not able to restore the video but was able to restore the audio."

Cesper slowly gets head back up. "What ... does it say?" He asks nervously.

"We have not listened. I feel you should be the first one to listen, privately if you desire."

"Is it ....?"

The engineer nods. "Yes, sir. If the file name is any indication, it is a video feed from the bridge. The radiation has destroyed most of remaining data. This bit is the last."

Cesper remains frozen for a moment as his eyes are filled with what could only be described as tear. He takes a deep breath as he wipes out his eyes.

"Let's ... hear it."

The audio is full of interference. There is a lot of statics and it's hard to make out initially, and then -

"Captain Mack confirmed dead!" A desperate voice is heard.

"Ram it! RAM IT!" Then another voice is heard, and Cesper recognizes it instantly; it is his daughter's voice.

“Suu...!” Cesper utters and stands up from his chair unintentionally. Everyone on the bridge looks at him whose eyes are progressively getting redder.

“En route...!” A voice utters. “Five seconds!” Another desperate voice is heard.

“Reactor going past 900% We’ve got only a few seconds before-”

“RAM IT! RAM IT!” Suu shouts repeatedly. Then – “AVENGE THE ADMIRAL!”

Then the audio becomes chaotic. There is a lot of sound of explosions, screams, and perhaps a distant laughter. It dies soon after.

After a short moment of silence, the engineer adds, “This was really the last bit. It seems the radiation has been progressively eating away any data left. That bit was really the last bit left.”

The bridge is silent, and Cesper is standing still, panting slightly.

“I...,” He tries to say something as he sits down and then he gets up at once.

“Excuse me.” He walks swiftly into his quarter as the chief engineer gives him a firm salute.

The moment he enters his quarter, he throws his fist at a nearby wall. He feels ashamed. He feels utterly ashamed. What was he doing back then? What were the Ark doing back then?

Admiral Kain perished to save the federation, and his daughter sacrificed herself to avenge the admiral.

What the fuck was he doing? Well, he was sitting, crunching numbers and negotiating a deal to escape to Saturn. What a typical bureaucrat, he thinks at this very moment.

He turns and leans against a wall which he punched just a moment ago. Letting out of a bitter laugh, he slides down to the floor.

“We are all fucking morons,” He says to himself.

Eventually, he gets up, walks toward his desk where there are still some of unfinished whiskey bags, grabs a bag and rips it open. Droplets of brown liquid floats everywhere as he does so.

“To my daughter!” He utters and adds, “She deserves some.”

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